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When She Learns Her Son Is Gay

Joseph M. Schuster

WHEN SHE WAS EIGHT, her mother used the word, but it meant something different.

This was long before she was Mrs. Schlafly, long before she was the scourge for the Right, “The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority,” the ardent anti-communist, claimed by John Birch as his loyal philosophical daughter, the comfort of Cardinal Mindszenty, the unrelenting foe of the ERA, protectress of the unborn, the raging moral core in the heart of a country bound, but for her, for hell.

This was 1932 and the anti-Christ came to St. Louis. Her daddy took her to see him because he wanted to teach her how to look evil full in the face and not blink, that was what he told her.

They rode the streetcar to Union Station where the band played “Happy Days Are Here Again” over and over, and the jittery throng was so thick the police closed off Market Street for two blocks on either side of the railroad terminal. A woman on stilts, wearing a straw hat with donkey ears, threw toffee wrapped in wax paper to the children, but her daddy told her to leave it on the pavement because it was Democratic sweets, and she did, although all around her boys and girls gleefully chomped on the sticky balls of candy, brown sugared saliva glinting from their chins. One boy ate seven pieces at once, his cheek swollen as by a tumor.

Before the Depression, her daddy had been Someone and even though they ate now only because her mother sold gloves behind the counter at Famous and Barr, he still had the bearing of a capital “P” Personage, and the crowd parted to let them pass, the regal man in the somber gray suit and the little girl in the powder blue dress and the yellow ribbons in her hair and the white gloves fastened with faux pearl buttons at her slender wrists.

Note: This story is fiction. Although there is an actual woman named Phyllis Schlafly, and although her son recently acknowledged, publicly, that he was gay, and although he survived an automobile accident on July 3, 1981, every scene in this story is the product of the writer’s imagination and has no basis in fact.

Inside, on the platform festooned with red, white and blue bunting, the brass band was deafening and shrill; the press of bodies frightened her, the clomp and scuffle of leather soles on the wooden flooring shook the platform until she thought it would collapse and they would all spill onto the tracks.

She wanted to cover her ears but her father laid his reassuring hand on the crown of her head and she knew nothing would happen to harm them.

When the train huffed into the station, the crowd let out cheers and huzzuhs. A woman nearby shrieked and swooned. Phyllis's daddy took her hand and they squeezed through the crush to the edge of the platform, until they were close enough to the train that Phyllis could feel the steam condensing on her face.

Roosevelt was a surprisingly small man for someone her father despised with such vehemence; she thought he would be massive, but he was gaunt and spoke haltingly to the crowd in a nasal voice.

"Socialist," her father said under his breath, so softly Phyllis imagined he didn't speak at all but that the word had formed on its own in her mind. "Bolshevik."

When her father spat, Phyllis thought the crowd would kill them; her heart raced, blood thrumming in her ears. Her father's spittle rolled down the steel side of Roosevelt's railroad car. Phyllis watched it, the slender, dissipating stream, until it was halted when it met one of the quarter-sized rivets that held the car together.

But no one saw.

"Peace," Roosevelt said, "and prosperity." The crowd erupted. Men tossed their skimmers high into the air, where the steam from the engine caught them and spun them end over end, bearing them down along the track.

When the train pulled out, the band struck up again, the trumpets blaring and the tuba blatting. The crowd applauded and stomped their feet, quaking the platform with even more violence than before.

Before the train had even fully left the station, Phyllis's father took her hand and led her back through the crowd, his face set in the way she would always remember it, as the countenance that was truly and honestly him; she would never remember him smiling, the way other women cherished the memory of the father of their girlhoods. She would think of the grim set

of his jaw, the way his eyes narrowed, the way his brows nearly met at the bridge of his nose; the determination.

Four blocks from the station, they broke free of the crowd. Unbuffeted, at last, by the bodies of the 16,000 men, women and children the *Globe-Democrat* estimated had come down to see the candidate, the chilly autumn wind swirled around her; as she trotted to keep pace with her father's long strides, she felt it like a liberation stinging her cheeks and ears and chapping her bare legs.

"Always remain defiant," he told her. "Even when the masses are opposed to you."

He instructed her like this the entire twelve blocks to Famous and Barr where her mother was working, murmuring to her lessons she would never forget.

At the entrance to the store, she let go of her father's hand and skipped ahead of him, past the perfume counter, the hosiery counter, the redolent confectionery counter with its silver tray of salted almonds, cashews, pecans and walnuts revolving in its mirrored case, the jewelry counter, to where her mother was folding a pair of women's black leather gloves into white tissue paper and laying them into a box for a stout woman in a mink coat.

"Mother, mother," Phyllis cried.

Her mother smiled but gave her a look that meant, hush, and so Phyllis fell silent but waited for her mother to hand over the woman's change and her purchase, Phyllis bouncing on her heels and knocking her knuckles against the glass counter.

"Daddy spat on the anti-Christ," she said when at last the woman left. "Daddy is so brave."

"My, aren't you gay," her mother said.

Sixty years later, Phyllis Schlafly is putting mums into the flower bed along the southeast edge of her home when the telephone rings. It is a brilliant late summer's day, blessedly cool for the time of year in southern Illinois, along the Mississippi River. The sky is utterly cloudless.

When she was giving birth to Johnny Boy (as she called him when he was young), Phyllis Schlafly thought about the Korean Cardinal. Joseph McCarthy had written to her about the Prelate a week before she went into

labor. "Forgive me for the gruesome details, details a woman as refined as yourself will no doubt find repulsive. But, as you yourself often said, we ought not be afraid to look full into the face of our enemy."

The early stages of her labor had been easy, but then it stopped, for some reason her body turning obstinate.

While she waited for it to progress toward birth, she thought of the Cardinal. It was what Sister Assunta had taught her in the second grade. "When you suffer," she had said, "it is better to contemplate the agony of one who suffered far more. Think on the passion of Our Lord, or the trials of one of our great saints."

The Communists had chained the Cardinal to the concrete floor, spread-eagled and naked on the cold, damp stone, Joseph McCarthy had written. He was hungry and humiliated, his head shaved, his body shaved, his underarms. They fed the Prince of the Church two-day-old dry rice, one of the Communists holding his chin and nose to force his mouth open while a second spooned the grain into it, and then they poured water down his throat. They fed him and gave him drink because they didn't want him to die; that would make a martyr of him, a more dangerous foe. Alive, they could force him to recant and embrace their cause.

The contractions made Phyllis Schlafly want to scream from the pain and the unrelenting ache in her lower back. The doctors had offered to etherize her, but the Blessed Mother hadn't been etherized when she gave birth to Our Lord.

Twice a day, the Communists washed down the Cardinal with a hose, in the morning and in the night, splashing frigid water over his sleek brown body, to clean away the urine and the diarrhea. When they caught him praying, the Communists gagged him with a rifle barrel until he started to retch. To keep him from choking to death on his own vomit, one of them held up the Cardinal's head. Then they cleaned him and slapped him for dirtying the Communist's uniform.

For eleven hours, meaningless and ineffective contractions seized her every five minutes, wracking her with pain, but she did not scream. She bit her bottom lip until she tasted the blood; her lips would be swollen and purple for a week afterwards.

The Communists did unspeakable things to the Cardinal, sexual things Joseph McCarthy alluded to but did not describe.

“Hail Mary, full of grace; blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” Phyllis Schlafly whispered through her clenched teeth, wanting her own womb to surrender the child. But it stubbornly refused.

After two weeks, the Communists cut off the Cardinal’s thumb and index and middle fingers of his right hand. The steel blade rang when it struck the concrete floor after passing through the Cardinal’s flesh and bone. They poured whiskey on his mutilated hand to keep away infection, and then bound up his hand in an old shirt so the bleeding would stop. Without his thumb and fingers, he could no longer say mass, could no longer hold the transubstantiated host or the chalice of wine-made-blood. The Communists knew that. They mocked him in Latin, “Introibo ad altari Dei.”

And yet the Cardinal held firm.

“He is a saint,” the Senator had written to Phyllis Schlafly. “A holy one. We ought to derive strength for our quest from him.”

Just past midnight, Phyllis Schlafly felt her baby give a kick. A small one, a blip on the mound of her belly. He turned. Her belly became a wave, rolling and cresting. She called out to the doctor. He checked her with two gloved fingers. She was complete. “We were concerned,” the doctor said. “We thought we may have to go in and take him.”

In four pushes, he was out, a boy, slick and white when the doctor held him upside down to give him a quick thwack on his bottom and then a second one before the child let out a mucousy yelp and then wailed and wailed, a healthy child after all.

A week later, she received a note from the Senator.

Lying in bed, nursing her infant, she read:

My dear Mrs. Schlafly,

I was delighted to hear of your joyful event. A son to carry on your husband’s name and your own good and holy works! I would, of course, be delighted to be an honorary godfather to your son; it is an honor surpassed only by that of my being able to serve and preserve this great nation of ours. It is with regret that I must tell you that our brother, the Great and Holy Man for whom I begged your prayers not three weeks ago, has passed on to our Heavenly Father’s realm. Word has just come to my office that he died on the same day upon which your John was born. I

am sorry that your joy must be tempered by this grievous news.

Yours in Christ and the Constitution,
Joseph McCarthy, Sen.

When Phyllis Schlafly read that, she understood that the Cardinal had expired at the precise moment her new son had moved within her. The Cardinal's suffering had blessed her.

Phyllis Schlafly rang for her nurse.

"Bring me the stationery from my desk, downstairs," she told the nurse. "It's in the center drawer, in a blue box."

When the woman brought it, Phyllis Schlafly gave her son to the nurse, sat up in bed and wrote a note to the Vatican. The stationery was pale blue with a silver border, the colors of Our Lady.

Your Holiness, Pius XII:

As your humble daughter in Christ, I write to ask that you open a case for canonization for our martyred brother, the Korean Cardinal.

Phyllis Schlafly realized then that she didn't know the name of the Cardinal. Nonetheless, she finished her letter, bade the nurse bring her postage and then to set it out for the mailman.

Three years later when the Democrats took control of the Senate and censured Joseph, when the nation discovered he had invented the legions of Communist infiltrators in the Department of State, Phyllis Schlafly learned he had also created the Korean Cardinal.

Phyllis Schlafly is putting mums into the flower bed along the southeast edge of her home when the telephone rings. No, it is not a ring, but the chirrup of the cellular phone she'd left on the front porch; it sounds akin to a frantic electronic whippoorwill.

The late summer afternoon is brilliant, blessedly cool for this time of year in southern Illinois, along the Mississippi River. The sky is utterly cloudless. Phyllis Schlafly sighs and lays her hand trowel on the ground, stands up, brushes the caked dirt from the knees of her jeans, and goes to answer the call. I will never finish landscaping this yard, she thinks with resignation. There are four flower beds beside her house that she wants to

plant, as well as the parallel beds that run along the edge of the walk from the street to her porch. She no sooner digs up the earth than someone wants something from her. A Forum member in Texarkana needing testimony for having *The Wizard of Oz* stricken from her daughter's sixth grade English curriculum. A Baltimore monsignor wanting a statement defending an all-male, celibate clergy. Her husband needing to go to physical therapy. Bar wanting her advice on a chocolate cookie recipe a women's magazine solicited.

It will be another summer of good intentions, another season of plants wasting in the shed, never even being taken from their clay pots. Next spring, when she goes out to see if anything is salvageable, she'll find them dried and brown, leaves and petals curling on the shelf in the shed like husks of cicadas. In the breeze she creates by opening the shed door, they will scuttle along the weathered cedar shelf, as if scurrying for a dark corner.

When John was seven and preparing for his First Holy Communion, Phyllis Schlafly told him a story about reverence for the Eucharist.

It was early on the Sunday morning on which he was to receive the Sacrament. John was dressed in the navy suit Phyllis Schlafly had purchased in the Young Men's department of Famous and Barr, the same store her mother had worked at more than a quarter century before, and Phyllis Schlafly called him into her study.

"Close the door," she said and he did, quietly, so as not to wake his father and his younger brothers and sisters.

"Come here," Phyllis Schlafly said to him. She was sitting in her rocking chair and she took him onto her lap, laying his head back against her shoulder. Slowly she rocked them both.

"This is nice," she said. "Like when you were a baby. But you're not a baby any longer."

Whenever they rocked back, her feet came off the floor. It was a large chair and she was a small woman, "a petite firebrand," a reporter had called her when he wrote about her work for the Senator half a dozen years earlier.

She asked him, "Do you believe that, when you receive the host, it is not bread but the actual Body of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?"

"I do."

"I wouldn't allow you to receive the Sacrament if you didn't. It's not to be taken lightly. Do you understand?"

“Uh huh,” he said, solemnly nodding.

“Do you understand?” she said again.

“Yes.” “Are you sure you understand?”

“Yes,” he said.

Upstairs, the commode flushed in the bathroom off the bedroom Phyllis Schlafly shared with her husband. She heard his slippered feet whisk on the carpeted steps and then he tapped on the door.

“In here, hon,” Phyllis Schlafly said.

Her husband opened the door and peeked his head in. “I won’t disturb you,” he said. “I just wanted to know if you wanted cereal or eggs.”

“I’m fine,” she said.

He held up his wrist, showing her his watch. “We can only eat for another half hour,” he said.

“I know.”

He closed the door.

“Did you want food?” Phyllis Schlafly asked her son.

“No.”

“Good boy. When I was a girl, we had to fast after midnight if we wanted to receive the Eucharist. I know the bishops intended the new rules to encourage more frequent reception, but there is something to be said about hardship and sacrifice. Always remember that.”

Solemnly he nodded.

“Once, many years ago,” she began, “there was a boy in Russia. He was about your age, seven, the son of a doctor. That is, his father had been a doctor until the Communists found out he was Catholic and then they didn’t let him be a doctor anymore. He was a janitor, then, in a school, proud in the face of their humiliation. Don’t ever let anyone humiliate you, John.”

John nodded and Phyllis Schlafly patted his head.

“The Communist soldiers wrecked the church. They smashed the windows and stole the sacramentals, the gold chalices and ciborium and the paten and the monstrance. In the ciborium were consecrated hosts and they threw them onto the floor of the church.”

Phyllis Schlafly saw the wafers strewn on the marble altar step, pale and delicate petals.

“The doctor’s son had been an altar boy, just as you’ll be when you’re old enough, and he found out what the Communist soldiers had done. At

night, then, he stole into the dark church and crept up the nave to the altar where he blessed himself, knelt down, bent forward and took a host into his mouth. Can you picture how he could do that? With his forehead against the floor, he would gather a host onto his tongue, without touching it. Only the priest can touch the host, you know that?"

"Yes," John said. His voice was sleepy from his mother's rocking.

"Night after night, he did that, taking only one host a night because you can only receive Communion once a day. Night after night after night for a month, six weeks he went. Finally, on the night there was only one host left on the floor, he went to the Church. It was so still. Can you imagine the stillness, John?"

Phyllis Schlafly held him in silence for a moment, the chair creaking and popping. It was old, a wedding present from her father to her mother, and Phyllis Schlafly had been nursed in it when she was an infant.

"He slipped in through the sacristy door," Phyllis Schlafly continued, her voice a husky whisper now, "just as he had every night to then, the same door he once entered in the dark of morning, when he would serve five A.M. mass. Slowly, he crossed the front of the church to the altar step. He knelt there, crossed himself, bent forward just as he had every night for those six or seven weeks, touched his forehead on the cold marble step, took the last remaining host onto his tongue. 'My Lord and my God,' he whispered, just as you'll say today when you receive the Eucharist, 'My Lord and my God,' just like that. Just like that."

Phyllis Schlafly paused, seeing the boy nearly prostrate in the ruined Russian church.

"Just then, a soldier passing the church looked in through a window. When he saw the boy, he raised his rifle and fired. The boy swallowed that last host, rolled over, and died."

For another moment, Phyllis Schlafly rocked her son and herself, allowing the resonance of the story to settle upon them.

"The boy was a soldier, too, a soldier of Christ," she said at last. "And that's what you'll have to be, son. Right?"

"Yes," he said.

*

The phone sounds like a frantic electronic whippoorwill that has alighted on the porch. When it rings, Phyllis Schlafly is putting mums into the flower bed along the southeast edge of her home. It is a brilliant late summer's day, blessedly cool for the time of year in southern Illinois, along the Mississippi River. The sky is utterly cloudless and its shade of blue reminds Phyllis Schlafly of a sky she'd seen in Arizona in 1964 when she'd visited Barry Goldwater to urge him to run for the Presidency. She and the Senator sat on his patio, drinking glasses of tea with sprigs of mint bobbing among the ice cubes. The Senator sipped thoughtfully and the two stared out over his lush green lawn that ran smack up against the desert on the far side of the fence that marked the border of his yard. The Senator was contemplating Phyllis Schlafly's argument that he run against the Texan and Phyllis Schlafly let him stew on it, not speaking, sitting there as the nuns had taught her, her heels flat on the ground, her knees together, her hands folded into her lap, waiting and waiting.

Finally, the Senator set his glass down.

"What the hell," he said. "What the goddamned hell. I'll crack that Texan's balls like walnuts at Thanksgiving."

Phyllis Schlafly lowered her eyes and smiled slightly. Picking up her tea, she was quiet for a respectful moment. "I have never seen such a sky," she said at last.

For a time when Phyllis Schlafly was a girl, she and her parents did not have a telephone. Bad news then was a telegram, a plump, uniformed boy standing in the dim hall outside their apartment, proffering an envelope to Phyllis Schlafly's father. Waiting for a tip no one offered, the fat uniformed boy smelled of hair oil and garlic. Caught between two of his incisors was a speck of meat that the boy worried with his tongue.

Phyllis Schlafly's grandfather was dead the telegram said.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," Phyllis Schlafly's father whispered, shutting the door. Outside, the boy's heavy footfalls tromped down the hall toward the steps.

John's difficult birth. John's First Communion, the solemn soldier of Christ in his navy blue suit processing up the nave, his hands folded, palms pressed flat together and held, fingers straight up, like a candle with its flame going to heaven. These are some of the things Phyllis Schlafly recalls on the

pleasant late-summer's afternoon in southwestern Illinois, when the sky is miraculously cloudless, shortly after her cellular phone—which she'd brought outside and left on the porch so that her husband would not be disturbed by the fifty to sixty calls a day she receives—chirrup like a frantic electronic whippoorwill.

"Hello," Phyllis Schlafly says, speaking loudly because, just then, a Mrazak Brothers United Van Lines moving truck rumbles past her house.

"Mrs. Schlafly?" a woman says on the other end.

On July 3, 1981, at 3:45 in the afternoon, the telephone rang. The summer that year was merciless. The temperature had been over 100 for a week and the forecasters were promising at least another week without relief. Already people had begun to die. The day before, across the river in St. Louis, police and paramedics had taken the bodies of an 81-year-old retired printer and his 83-year-old wife out of their one-story brick home on the near Southside. "They baked inside their own home," a paramedic said. The camera showed two paramedics wearing respirators, wheeling the dead couple out on gurneys, zipped into rubber body bags.

Phyllis Schlafly was sitting at her computer, writing the Independence Day remarks she would deliver at the annual Eagle Forum picnic. "These are the three holiest days of the year," her father had told her. "Easter, because that was when our Savior conquered death and rose from the tomb; Christmas, because that was the day Christ was born and salvation came into the world; and the Fourth of July, because that was the day the greatest country in history was born."

Phyllis Schlafly was typing these words when the telephone rang. Long afterwards, she would remember that she had just typed the "I" in "salvation" when it rang the first time and that she finished the word and picked up the telephone in the middle of the second ring.

It was the Illinois Highway Patrol.

John Schlafly had been travelling northbound on Interstate 55 near Bolingbrook, Illinois, half-an-hour west of Chicago, when a 22-year-old Franklin Park resident, driving at a high rate of speed, veered from the left lane into the right and rear-ended John Schlafly's 1980 subcompact car.

Phyllis Schlafly's son's car hit the shoulder of the road and rolled over. The driver of the other car was uninjured but John Schlafly was in the emergency room at Edwards Hospital in Naperville, in critical condition.

While the highway patrol officer related all of this to Phyllis Schlafly, speaking in a flat, expressionless tone, Phyllis Schlafly stared at her computer's VDT, watching the green cursor blink.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Schlafly," the patrolman said, his voice softening, no longer official. "My wife works for your Stop ERA up in this neck of the woods. She says she doesn't know what the world would come to without Phyllis Schlafly in it. I'm terribly sorry, ma'am."

"What's your wife's name?" Phyllis Schlafly said. She began tapping the backspace key idly, erasing the "n," then the "o," then the "i," the "t," the "a," and finally the "v," until the cursor rested at the place it stood when the phone had rung.

"Naomi Chisholm," the patrolman said.

"She must be a wonderful wife for you," Phyllis Schlafly said. "Tell Naomi I thank her for her dedication."

When she hung up, Phyllis Schlafly finished the final three sentences of her remarks, ran them through the spell-check, printed them out, then called one of her lieutenants from the Eagle Forum to tell her what had happened to John. She put the remarks into an envelope and put the envelope into her mailbox so the woman could come by her house, pick them up, and read them the following day at the picnic. Then Phyllis Schlafly drove to Naperville to see her son.

The next day, in the early hours, while America was waking to celebrate its 205th birthday, Phyllis Schlafly sat in a hard wooden chair in the corner of her son's hospital room while, medicated, he slept, breathing uneasily, his chest filled with mucous. John Schlafly's handsome face was bloated, discolored by yellowing bruises and dull red hematomas. At times, he murmured in his uneasy sleep, but there were no words Phyllis Schlafly recognized.

Hourly, a stocky young nurse tiptoed into the room to check on him, her white crepe shoes creaking on the linoleum floor. She studied the monitor beeping away over his bed, the twin white spots trailing across the dark grid measuring John Schlafly's pulse and breath, and made a note on his chart clipped at the foot of the bed. Once, with her hand, she gingerly brushed John Schlafly's hair away from his brow and laid her four fingertips on his forehead, more in the manner of someone giving a pat of affection than of someone testing crudely for fever.

All through that early morning, in the dim room, Phyllis Schlafly prayed forty-five decades of the rosary, repeating the cycle of the fifteen Joyful, Glorious and Sorrowful Mysteries three times.

At six A.M., when the nurse came in, she turned to Phyllis Schlafly and whispered, "I read in the paper the other guy was released on \$35 bond. What a crazy world."

But Phyllis Schlafly didn't care what price the other man had paid to be out of jail, walking the streets on the warmest Independence Day in thirty-seven years, a day "hot as a firecracker," Phyllis Schlafly's father used to say. She finished her third time through the Sorrowful Mysteries and began her third recitation using the Joyful Mysteries, "The Annunciation: The Archangel tells Mary that, although she is a Virgin, she will conceive and bear the Messiah."

Phyllis Schlafly's rosary had fifty-nine clear stones, sixteen-faceted faux diamonds strung on a sterling silver chain. In each was a single drop of water drawn from the spring at Lourdes. More than twenty years ago, John XXIII had blessed the rosary for Phyllis Schlafly; this was before he called the Vatican Council that changed the Church she loved.

As the sun rose, a thin shaft of light filtered into the room from where the draperies did not quite meet across the window. As Phyllis Schlafly worked her fingers over the beads, her rosary took the light and reflected it over the entire room, pale minute stars bouncing from the wall to the ceiling and spilling over John Schlafly.

Several times, lulled by the repetition of nearly 500 Hail Marys, Phyllis Schlafly felt herself falling asleep. She used a trick Sister Assunta had taught her, digging a fingernail into the flesh at the base of her thumb, pricking herself whenever she began to drowse.

Shortly before nine A.M., John Schlafly stirred in the bed. Even in the dimness, Phyllis Schlafly could see when he opened his eyes. He looked at her, blinking, his brow furrowed as though he were in confusion.

"I'm here, honey," Phyllis Schlafly said, tucking her rosary beneath herself so he wouldn't see it, so he wouldn't know how hard she had worked to keep him alive.

The prophet Simeon had promised Our Lady that her Son's life would be like seven daggers in her heart.

Phyllis Schlafly is putting mums into the flower bed along the southeast edge of her home when the telephone rings. It is a brilliant late summer's day, blessedly cool for the time of year in southern Illinois, along the Mississippi River. The sky is utterly cloudless.

Kneeling in the dark, rich soil of Alton, Illinois, spading the ground for her yellow spider mums, with dirt caked beneath her nails, Phyllis Schlafly sits back on her haunches, wondering if her husband will answer the telephone or if he is still napping. Phyllis Schlafly taps the handle of her trowel on the ground, knocking the caked dirt from the blade. It is probably a reporter, she thinks. There are three or four calling every day, wanting her to talk about the Convention, about the conservative wing's fight to control the Republican Party, about Pat Buchanan's remarks, about her own remarks that the moderate Republicans were "wimp politicians," about the President's chances against the Arkansan, about how George had slipped in the polls from the near ninety percent Reaganesque approval rating after Desert Storm to a low thirty percent Carteresque rating. She should go in and return the reporter's call right away, if indeed that's who is calling. Phyllis Schlafly understands reporters and their deadlines; she knows that calling a reporter back five minutes late is a missed chance to do something for the Party.

But the afternoon is deliciously peaceful. In a week, she will leave for a two-month tour of the country, rallying her Eagle Forum legions to get out and work for the President. She will not be home when the spider mums blossom.

She should answer it, but she wants nothing more than to sink her trowel into the earth, turn it up, expose half a dozen segmented worms squirming in the dirt, surprised by the sudden sunlight and cool summer air.

But Phyllis Schlafly does not let the phone ring inside the house until the answering machine switches on. She faces her demons. It is the gift her father gave her.

The phone, sitting on the front porch, chirrup like a frantic whippoorwill and Phyllis Schlafly answers it on the second ring. She listens to a reporter read a story to her: "son of family values crusader . . . once said the ERA threatened to legalize homosexual marriage . . . two-time failed GOP congressional candidate in Illinois . . . one of the chief architects of the

conservative platform approved at last month's Republican convention in Houston."

Part-way through, Phyllis Schlafly stops the reporter.

"I think there are more words in your article about me than about my son," she says.

The reporter does not laugh, but continues reading to the end of the story. "Do you wish to comment?" she asks.

Phyllis Schlafly asks the reporter to give her a moment and takes the telephone down from her ear, resting it against her hip. The sky is utterly cloudless. A silver speck crawls across the blue expanse, a fighter from Scott Air Force Base, Phyllis Schlafly knows. In the maple that stands in her neighbor's yard, a squirrel is poised on a high, dead branch. The wood is darker than that of the living branches, nearly black, almost as if it were charred. Beneath the squirrel's weight, the branch shakes. Nervously, the squirrel twitches his tail side to side and furls and unfurls it, obviously frightened of the distance from branch to roof. Finally, he leaps, nearly falling short, just managing to catch his hind legs on the lip of the gutter. Phyllis Schlafly tries to picture what her son is doing at this moment: Sitting in his law office, his suit jacket draped across the back of his chair as he studies a legal brief.

Phyllis Schlafly lays the phone against her cheek once more.

"I love my son," she says. "I love my son. That's all I have to say."

Phyllis Schlafly goes back to the flower bed after the call, kneels in the cool, dark earth, and picks up her trowel. The article and the ones that follow will be an embarrassment to her, she knows. Her enemies will gloat, the legion of enemies she has made in forty years of loving her country in the only way she knew how, that is, passionately and unflinchingly; in forty years of fighting communists and feminists and abortionists; in forty years of fighting against the ERA and *Roe v. Wade* and day care centers and sex education in the schools and textbooks that preached relative humanism; in forty years of fighting immoral politicians like Kennedy and Dodd and now the newest, the adulterer from Arkansas—all her enemies will gloat over their morning coffee and copies of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. They'll label her a hypocrite, she knows, can hear them now calling into Larry King, calling into KMOX in St. Louis and WBBM in Chicago and anywhere radio broadcasters open the phone lines to their listeners.

Phyllis Schlafly lays down her trowel and sits back onto her heels, resting her hands on the muddy knees of her jeans. The sky is brilliant, cloudless, a sky of expectation, of portent. For the briefest of instants, Phyllis Schlafly feels something will happen just then, something awesome and powerful, and she waits for it, like the moment before John's birth when he crested across her belly and she felt the non-existent Korean Cardinal's blessing.

The earth is cool against her knees. On her forearms and neck and face, perspiration beads, but it is not unpleasant. She becomes aware that a strand of her hair tickles her throat and she brushes it aside. In her sudden swell of anxiety, her breathing is rapid and shallow.

Then she remembers the trick Sister Assunta taught her, the trick of contemplating the agony of another whose suffering is far worse than one's own.

She thinks of a woman eleven years, two months and fifteen days younger than she is at this moment, a woman inexorably praying through forty-five decades of the rosary, a woman whose son may die at any moment. When, an hour and a half past sunrise on one of the greatest days of the year, her son stirs, recalled to life, the woman gets out of her chair, the chair from which she has not moved for seven hours. Or rather, she tries to get out of her chair, but her legs have gone to sleep and so she stumbles backwards and it takes a minute or two of vigorously rubbing her thighs and calves before she can walk across the room to her son in the hospital bed. There, she strokes his hair until he goes back to sleep, using her left hand, because she has hidden her right behind her back, so he cannot see the wound she has gouged in her palm on his behalf.

Kneeling in her flower bed in Alton, Illinois, on September 18, 1992, Phyllis Schlafly contemplates the pain of that other, younger woman. She takes up her spade again and sinks the blade into the earth, preparing it for the spider mums.